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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how pedagogical approaches in writing classrooms can better draw upon the whole of students' abilities--intellectual, affective, and creative. Many teachers know too well that students rarely respond well to writing prompts which monopolize their cognitive, linear capacities while ignoring creative strategies and affective approaches to writing and thinking. Allowing creativity to merge with pedagogical theories taps into the multifaceted resources inherent in each student. Creativity in writing instruction refers to thought processes, rhetorical approaches, and functional techniques used in writing. Functional techniques in fictional writing are matters of point of view, voice, tone, rhythm, grammar, and setting. Fictional techniques are also matters of scene, summary, and description. As instructors bring exercises into the classroom that utilize students' creative abilities, the likelihood is that their writing will become autotelic, or intrinsically motivated. They will no longer venture into a rhetorical purpose solely because the instructor tells them to do so, or because they want a good grade--they will instead dive into a writing task because it is exciting, challenging, or even fun. The more writers are able to utilize their creative capacities in producing texts, the more they will simply enjoy the task in and of itself. The more teachers encourage creative and affective approaches to writing, the more they will increase the autotelic factor in students' writing processes. (Contains eight references.) (CR)

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Motivating Students To Write: Implementing Creative Theory to Overcome the Habitual and Encourage Autotelic Flow

This paper is an examination of how our pedagogical approaches in writing classrooms can better draw upon the whole of our students' abilities—intellectual, affective and creative. As teachers, we so often foreground our students' intellectual abilities while at the same time either consciously ignoring (or unconsciously turning away from) their creative abilities. Many of us know all too well that students rarely respond well to writing prompts which monopolize their cognitive, linear capacities while ignoring creative strategies and affective approaches to writing and thinking. By allowing theories of creativity to merge with our pedagogical theories, we can better tap into the multifaceted resources inherent in each one of our students.

First I will attempt to define creativity in terms of thought process, rhetorical strategy and writing technique. Then, after examining the role of habit in thinking and writing, I will briefly review Raffel's notion of awareness. Notions of Csikszentmihalyi's flow and autotelism will then be examined. Finally, I will conclude by making explicit connections between creative theory and writing pedagogy.

Some Definitions of Creativity

What exactly is creativity? How can we define it in further detail and also in terms of writing? In many respects, the abstract term *creativity* is as difficult to define as the highly debatable term *art*. So often creativity is subjectively defined from person to person: we know when we see it and we know when we experience it—even if we can't explain it. While subjective definitions certainly have their validity, I will attempt to come to some objective understandings of creativity. For the purpose of this paper, I will limit my definition of creativity to three facets of writing: thought

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processes, rhetorical approches, and functional techniques used in writing.

• ***Creative Thinking***

Creative thought seems to happen when a person steps outside of two patterns of common thinking: individual and communal. We can view creative thinking on an individual basis in that people think creatively when they break out of their typical patterns of viewing the world. And we can also define creative thinking on a cultural basis in that people think creatively when they break out of their community's typical patterns of viewing. In both individual and communal contexts, habit is recognized and tradition is broken by the thinker.

An example that will further explain thinking in terms of these two context is one from my own life. Generally speaking, one of the best ways for me to think is by enacting several sides of a fictional dialogue while walking or pacing. I have found that whenever I am confronted with a problem—whether it be academic or personal, intellectual or emotional—I will take to the streets and trails of my community in order to "talk" out the problem in my mind. Yet, this is a thought process that I am just now discovering after almost three decades of schooling in traditional methods of thinking. I am just now learning to leave my office, my classrooms and my den in order to take to the streets. I am just now learning to "talk" my problems out in terms of fictional creations.

In school, I was rarely encouraged or taught to seek out alternative ways of thinking. Perhaps many of us were told that the proper places to think are at our desks, behind pads of paper or in front of computer screens. Seldom do we have teachers tell us, "Here's a problem I want you to solve. Now leave the classroom, take a walk on the track and think about it for a while." In fact, such suggestions are usually reserved as punishment—an order which forces us to think twice before we do a misdeed again. Seldom do we have teachers tell us to "think of all participants in a controversy or issue and imagine what they might say to each other." Perhaps such

advice is usually reserved for college-level, script writing classes.

A factor in my personal anecdote that is of even more significance is the fact that I am but one person with one favorite way of solving problems. How many other non-traditional ways are there to think? In a class of 25 students, does this mean they best think 25 different ways? If so, when do we, as teachers, adjust our pedagogy to our student's cognitive quirks and *idea*syncracies? On the other hand, when do our students adjust their natural thought tendencies to our "best" ways of teaching?

Yet another example, one which involves emergence from a community's traditional procedures for thinking, involves the famous American nuclear physicist Enrico Fermi (Nobel Prize, 1938). Due to a seemingly spontaneous whim, he discovered the effect that slow neutrons would have on induced radioactivity. His own words best describe the event:

> We were working very hard on the neutron-induced radioactivity and the results we were obtaining made no sense. One day, as I came to the laboratory, it occurred to me that I should examine the effect of placing a piece of lead before the incident neutrons. Instead of my usual custom, I took great pains to have the piece of lead precisely machined. I was clearly dissatisfied with something; I tried every excuse to postpone putting the piece of lead in its place. When finally, with some reluctance, I was going to put it in place, I said to myself: "No, I do not want this piece of lead here; what I want is a piece of paraffin." It was just like that, with no advance warning, no conscious prior reasoning. I immediately took some odd piece of paraffin and placed it where the piece of lead was to have been. (Chandrasekhar, 21)

It was this spontaneous whim, void of any "conscious prior reasoning," that eventually led to the experiment's success. Such impulsive, unplanned decisions do not seem to reflect the scientific community's traditional ways of thinking about experimental procedure. If Fermi had been trained in traditional approaches to scientific method, he seems to have resisted them on this occasion. Burton Raffel, author of Artists All: Creativity, the University, and the World, writes that our capacity to draw upon the unconscious means "resisting the siren call of the automatic, the habitual" (17). When the muse visits, he continues, "what bubbles up from inside

is never yesterday's printed menu. . . never the Boy Scout Code of Conduct" (17). Instead the muse bestows on us a *new synthesis* of old viewpoints, familiar strategies, and common techniques.[1]

• ***Creative Rhetoric***

A second important phenomena from which to view creativity is rhetorical approach. What strategies do writers and speakers use to inform and persuade audiences? Again, as we examine creativity (this time through a rhetorical lens) we can view it in terms of both communal and individual patterns.

Certainly, writers are creative when they break out of the commonly practiced rhetorical strategies of their immediate (and possibly extended) community. Often, this process tends to stretch or alter their community's traditional approaches to writing. Take, for example, Alice Walker's 1980 text "Coming Apart." In her strategic attempt to inform readers about pornography (expository writing) and convince them of its detriments (persuasive writing), she steps outside of traditional, rhetorical conventions of essay writing. At first Walker gives us a *story* of a wife's dialectic attempts to revise her husband's view of women and culture by challenging his use of pornography. Then, much like Socrates might do, the wife attempts to disclose the contradictions inherent in her husband's arguments in favor of pornography. As the story progresses, the wife begins reading feminist essays and sharing them with her husband. We see nine block excerpts from these essays synthesized into the latter half of the story—in much the same way we might come across block quotes in a traditional expository or persuasive essay. Thus, Walker blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction, a distinction often used to neatly categorize texts into communal patterns of practice.

In terms of pedagogy, a different and perhaps more important form of creativity

[1] Such deviations from traditional, scientific methods are surprisingly common. See Raffel, chapters two and three, for more discussion of (and examples of) the emergence of creativity within scientific communities.

arises when writers attempt rhetorical strategies that they, individually, have never before attempted. Imagine if you can (it will not be hard) the student who predominately writes in a distant and passive third-person voice in order to sound more "academic" and respectable to readers. Let us say this same writer, for one reason or another, takes a new turn, a new approach in rhetorical strategy. This writer considers audience in a new light by addressing readers in the first and/or second-person voice—a strategy s/he has never before attempted. By taking such a risk, such a novel way of approaching writing, this student would most certainly be implementing a creative rhetorical strategy.

• ***Creative Writing Technique***

Then there is a third lens through which we can view creativity—writing technique.[2] Functional techniques in fictional writing are matters of point of view, voice, tone, rhythm, grammar and setting. Fictional techniques are also matters of scene, summary and description. While many of these terms are typically used to describe fiction and poetry, they can each be applied just as appropriately to non-fiction writing. Again, writers are certainly being creative when they take risks and try new methods not commonly used by themselves or their communities. Yet for purposes of this paper, I am particularly interested in another creative use of writing technique—the implementation of *fictional* writing techniques in what are generally considered to be non-fiction genres of writing.

As mentioned above, we often discuss fiction and non-fiction as if there were a clear, solid line differentiating between the two. Yet fiction writers chose given points of view for many of the same reasons an essayist will. For the fiction writer, first person lends reliability and believability to the narrator, or the teller of the story. For the essayist, first person also lends reliability and believability to the teller, or the

[2] There are, of course, many other valid lenses through which we could examine and discuss creativity. Due to page constraints however, I limit my present discussion to three which I think have the most pertience to teachers of writing.

expositor of the essay. If we expand the notion of first-person voice to first-person story telling, we will see strong parallels between the fiction writers and the essayists. If an essayist, or rhetor, attempts to persuade an audience that handguns should be outlawed, then an elaborate, believable, first-person anecdote will lend credibility to the writer's words. If a picture paints a thousand words, experience will lend credibility and persuasion to those words. If, on the other hand, we are reading a fictional story about the danger of handguns, a narrator's anecdote can also draw us into the tale (and persuade us) because the narrator, like the essayists, *experienced* the subject at hand. Once again, experience revealed through the telling of first-person stories will elicit an increased respect from readers.

Of course, the functional techniques used by fiction writers and essayists alike go well beyond voice and anecdote. Technique is also a matter of citation—who we chose—and more importantly who we do not chose—to quote. Whose voices will we utilize in our texts to help us tell our stories and prove our points?

Consider also rhythm, another technique which fiction writers and essayists use for many of the same reasons. Rhythm can draw readers in, causing them to enjoy the pace of a given text. Variations in sentence length and grammatical constructions can woo us, rock us, and even set us on edge—all in accordance with the *content* of the text. Just as a story teller will bunch together shorter and shorter sentences immediately before a story's climax, so too will a good essayist bunch together a string of short sentences just before driving home a key argument or point.

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In short, creativity is a new synthesis of old viewpoints, familiar strategies, and common techniques. As we consider how we might pedagogically acknowledge such notions of creativity—as well as the vague line between fiction and non-fiction—we must remember that experimentation is the rule in teaching creative thinking, creative strategy and creative technique; not perfection. Raffel himself notes that, "In

every art, technique alone is sterile. . . . [and] perfection is almost a sign of lesser artistic status. . ." (19). In our own attempts to creatively teach students to exercise creativity, experimentation will be a standard, if not an example.

Recognition of the Habitual

In his book, Burton Raffel explores what he calls the three stages of awareness—conscious, habit and unconscious—stating that a balance must be struck between the three. According him, though, most of us need more *conscious* control of our minds and lives. He writes that we are seldom aware of our own institutions and that we "are not consciously aware of the tracks we follow and the signs we obey" (8). In other words, we are not always conscious of the *reasons* for doing many of the activities we do on a regular basis. In fact, Raffel even goes so far as to say that

> little of what we say or do all through lives—not just when we are intellectualizing—is in the strict sense of the word 'conscious.' A more accurate description of our life process would be: 'a journey conducted via automatic pilot.' The opposite of 'conscious' is of course 'unconscious'—but the bulk of our lives is not led unconsciously so much as by rote and habit, by custom and rule. (4)

Granted, not all of us would agree that the bulk of our lives is conducted via automated pilot. Yet how much does this describe our pedagogy? How much does this describe the way our students respond to our essay assignments and other in-class activities? It is important to note that Raffel writes that we need some element of habit to survive; to constantly be in a conscious state of mind would be overwhelming and exhausting. Nonetheless, most of us do need to gain significantly more "conscious control of our own existences" (9) In each of my previous definitions of creativity, each involves a conscious emergence from habits of the self and the community.

Raffel also writes that "we are all . . . intuitive and illogical, irrational and emotional, quite as much as (and perhaps even more than) we are trained and logical, rational and dispassionate" (134). Rather than viewing these extreme traits as contrary dichotomies, Raffel seems to view them as existing along a continuum—a continuum that's a bit off kilter in the academy. We are not one or the other, but both with an

imbalance. Most of us might agree that much of our academic experiences have highly favored the logical, rational, dispassionate part of ourselves. I personally can recall countless college courses—both undergraduate and graduate—that subtly required me to leave creativity, emotion and intuition in the hallway. Yet, that which motivates many of us to stay in academe are those rare gems, those few teachers and classes that require us to balance our cognitive, linear strengths with the complementary qualities of emotion, intuition and recursive thinking. In short, Raffel calls for a reconciliation between the two extremes of a continuum.

Flow and Autotelism

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, a cognitive psychologist who has extensively studied human motivation, draws substantially on the notion of autotelism: self-direction and self-motivation. In his article "Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation," he explores some of the "universal characteristics associated with enjoyable activities" (131). Before we examine what these characterisitics are, let's examine what an "enjoyable activity" is. Primarily, Csikszentmihalyi views enjoyable acitivities in terms of meaningful "flow" experiences. In short, these are optimal experiences in which a participant of an activity becomes so immersed in that activity that s/he rises above the constraints inherent in that activity. In addition, such participants are always capable of transforming motivations from extrinsic to intrinsic.

One of the characterisitics of such enjoyable activities is the merging of action and awareness. When actions are complemented by a conscious awareness of the constituents of an activity, the steps that need to be taken—as well as a vision of where one is to begin and end—become clearly realized. One's actions are always complemented by a complete understanding of *why* one is involved in a given activity. The merging of action and awareness is also brought about by the correct matching of challenges with skill levels. People who enter states of autotelic flow are neither too overwhelmed nor too bored by the given activity.

Tasks, any tasks, become autotelic when the above conditions are met. Enjoyable activites, are by definition, autotelic. One by-product of such autotelic flow states is that there is a transcendence or forgetfulness of self. When there is a high level of enthusiasm, purpose and challenge, many students will rise above any negative self images they might have of themselves as writers. Such a transcendence of self might also help students overcome writer's block in that they will see beyond the limitations of both themselves as writers and the constraints inherent in the writing process (whether real or imaginary).

As we bring exercises into the classroom that utilize our students' creative abilities, we will increase the likelihood that their writing will become autotelic, or intrinsically motivated. They will no longer venture into a rhetorical purpose solely because we are telling them to do so, or because they want a good grade; they will instead dive into a writing task because it is also exciting, challenging—and perhaps even fun. They will taste the excitement of trying to overcome goals that they themselves have created. The *action* of writing will merge with an *awareness* of why they are writing.

Conclusion

My hunch is that the more writers are able to utilize their creative capacities in producing texts, the more they will simply *enjoy* the task in and of itself. Also, the more writers know about different rhetorical stances to take, the more fun they might have in approaching readers. As well, the more student writers understand the techniques that fiction writers use to make dominant impressions, convey meaning, and inform readers, the more they will be able to integrate these techniques in all forms of writing, story and essay alike. Yet another reason the writing process can be fun is due to the revelation and insight that often results from breaking out of old cognition patterns. And though revelations and insights often come after long bouts of struggle with dissonance, they are almost always *exciting* when they do come.

The more we encourage creative and affective approaches to writing—as complements to linear, cognitive approaches—the more we will increase the autotelic factor in our students' writing processes. While extrinsically motivated assignments draw primarily on habit, intrinsically motivated autotelic assignments balance the conscious and unconscious states of awareness. Both Raffel and Csikszentmihalyi seem to point to our need to take more conscious control of our lives. Certainly, we could expand this notion by saying that we need to also take more conscious *risks* in our lives—in our pedagogy, in our own writing, and in the kinds of writing we assign to our students.

If we, and our students, are to fill our lives and educations with more autotelic experiences, then we need to begin training our minds to balance all three states of awareness. Although creative insights and breakthroughs often seem to come effortlessly, Raffel makes it clear that most creative epiphanies are both preceded and accompanied by hard work. And while epiphanies of thought and technique are often preceded by a long, conscious struggle with a posed problem, this conscious effort is usually also followed by a letting-go of that problem into the realm of unconscious rest and separation from the challenge. Perhaps our first step, then, is to train our minds and wills to better operate in all three modes of awareness. As we do this, perhaps our students' reasons for learning—and our reasons for teaching—will become more intrinsically motivated.

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